

The last word Looking back

by the Editors

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Although we're "a review of contemporary cinema," we're excited to present material on the Film and Photo League in this issue. Except for a few scattered articles and Tam Brandon's tours around the country with programs of League films, this courageous moment in radical U.S. filmmaking has remained little-known.

The left does have a history, a rich history of determination and struggle against U.S. capitalism. Because bourgeois history, the education system, and the media try to obliterate or distort our history, the responsibility for reclaiming it falls on us. As the recent mass popularity of *ROOTS* shows, there is a genuine hunger for the real history of people fighting for control of their lives. But official bourgeois history has nothing to offer people, as the mass apathy to the Bicentennial hoopla demonstrated. Radical history offers a vibrant alternative, and the recent surge of interest in women's history and labor history has resulted in some fine films such as *UNION MAIDS* and *HARLAN COUNTY, USA*.

While the League's experiences have natural historical interest, they are even more important for the lessons we can draw from them. The men and women involved in the League faced a situation similar to the one faced by radical filmmakers today: creating and distributing revolutionary films within the context of U.S. capitalism. The history of the League shows what can be done with very limited human and material resources. We can also see the importance of close contact between filmmakers and critics on the one hand and actual political action on the streets and in the workplaces.

The League's history also helps us understand the relations of filmmaking, political action, and political organization. Through its coordinating role in the League, the Communist Party provided a

situation in which filmmakers, writers, teachers, and other artists could relate to political struggle. The party brought members, fellow travelers, and working people together in an energizing way. At its best, the party helped each different group contribute to and reinforce the other.

We cannot separate the Film and Photo League from the history of the Communist Party in the 30s—its accomplishments as well as its failures. There are negative lessons, as well as positive ones, to be learned. For example, the CP's extreme policy changes confused many people, particularly when these changes seemed to have little to do with U.S. conditions. During the party's "Third Period" (1927-35), the CP swerved sharply left. Social democrats and other reformers were attacked as no different than the fascists. Abruptly, the party then entered the Popular Front period in which it worked with any elements, including the bourgeoisie, to build a lowest common denominator fight against fascism. Abruptly again, in 1939, with the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact, the party shifted again, disillusioning many members and followers in the process. The CP's slavish adherence to every shift of Soviet foreign policy reduced its effectiveness in the United States. Similarly, while the CP was often in the lead of antiracist struggle, it often failed to organize well in the black community or even abandoned grass roots work when policy shifted. The obvious lesson is that proletarian internationalism is not always best served by hitching your wagon to some other red's star.

Many times the CP's organizing work amounted to little more than militantly standing for immediate demands: socialism was put on the back burner. (This mistake is repeated in the film *UNION MAIDS* which totally ignores the close relation of the women depicted to the CP.) While in one short editorial we can't thoroughly analyze something as complex as the CP in the 30s, that evaluation and critique is now being done by left historians and critics. Sometimes it is too uncritical and romantic. Sometimes it is too dogmatic or insensitive to historical realities. But the important point is this: we can neither fully understand nor critically evaluate the Film and Photo League (or for that matter any other part of the left-leaning filmmaking and criticism of the 30s, such as Vidor's *DAILY BREAD*, Ford's *GRAPES OF WRATH*, and the magazines *Experimental Cinema* and *Film Front*) unless we understand it in the larger political context of the realities of the times. We hope that printing this material will stimulate interest in further examination of the dialectical relation of the League to the CP and the League to the larger political realities of the 30s.

Similarly, today we can't understand and evaluate new political films unless we have a sense of the political movement and options around us. Actually, this goes for all film—avant-garde as well as Hollywood. Unlike bourgeois aestheticism, left film work is inseparable from a political analysis of the world we live in and participation in its struggles.

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